

Urban landscapes as ensembles

In his contribution to this issue (pp. 65-9), Ivor Samuels draws attention to the preoccupation of much of the architectural literature with special buildings – the few that stand out, rather than the many that make up the majority of the environments in which most people live. In his concern about this he is also echoing Habraken's view that as observers of the built environment 'we should emulate the biologist who studies all plants with equal zeal' (Habraken, 2009, p. 132). These standpoints will strike a chord for many architects with urban morphological interests.

The problem, of course, is by no means only a matter of narrow vision among architects. An undue focus on the particularities of the urban landscape is evident in other ways and among other fields and professions. The tendency to treat features in the urban landscape – buildings, streets, open spaces – as individual objects rather than parts of an integrated entity is widespread. Within built environment studies and professions, appreciation of the objects under consideration, though commonly grounded in a functional or formal typology, frequently lacks understanding of, and sympathy with, how they fit together. There is a need for greater attention to urban landscapes as ensembles.

The problem is particularly serious within heritage conservation. Much of the singling out of urban heritage sites for protection and special treatment has focused, and still does focus, in a rather narrow way on monuments and sites of historic significance rather than treating these as part of a wider historical urban landscape. Only belatedly have some of the significant problems of conservation inherent in such a limited perspective been recognized, and they are far from being resolved: the UNESCO World Heritage Centre is currently addressing this very matter through its focus on historic urban landscapes in its Cities Programme.

The sectional thinking that lies at the root of restricted views of urban landscape phenomena has affected the various disciplines and professions differently. Furthermore the incidence of the problem has varied geographically and historically. The importance of an integrated approach to the urban landscape was recognized long ago among German-speaking scholars (Schlüter, 1899), including architects, urban historians and geographers. But unfortunately some of the momentum of that approach has been lost in recent decades in the face of rampant influence from the anglophone world.

Elsewhere, including in English-speaking countries and especially in professional practice, sectional views have long been present. In the case of heritage studies, a longterm focus on special sites and monuments has helped to perpetuate the relative neglect of historico-geographical context. This tendency is evident among English-speaking archaeologists and architectural historians engaged in this applied field. It parallels the emphasis of their architectural counterparts on individual 'iconic' structures: not surprisingly, sometimes these all too conspicuous structures have had seriously detrimental effects on sites designated, with similar inattention to context, for their special heritage value.

Fortunately the architectural profession is not without those for whom historicogeographical context is fundamental. The Muratorian school of thought, with its small but dedicated following within Italy, is a striking case. The Conzenian school is a parallel case within anglophone geography, having its roots in the work of German-speaking scholars referred to previously. Unfortunately in both cases the influence of these 'schools' on planning practice has been too small to justify much optimism that a beneficial swing towards a more integrated approach is imminent.

Taking a long view of urban morphology as a field of knowledge and practice, it is timely to reflect on a number of matters if a more integrated view of the urban landscape is to prevail. The first is the desirability of reinvigorating integrated landscape study in its homeland – the German-speaking countries. Perhaps the locating of this year's ISUF conference in Hamburg will signify a beginning of this process. The second is the desirability of stimulating greater concern among urban morphologists in two regards. One of these is the development of research on the perception of urban form: much has been achieved in, for example, elucidating and mapping urban landscape regions but the links between such work and the understanding of urban landscapes by practising planners and the public requires considerably more work. The other and not unrelated aspect is the need to explore the relationship between the landscapes of the urban morphologist and behaviour. As we reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the light we cast on the urban landscape, and the variations in this respect among and between disciplines, countries,

researchers and practitioners, let us give more thought to the way in which that light relates to the way in which people function in their daily lives and, not least, identify with their built environments.

References

- Habraken, N. J. (2009) 'On designing, inhabitation and morphology', *Urban Morphology* 13, 131-3.
- Schlüter, O. (1899) 'Bemerkungen zur Siedlungsgeographie', *Geographische Zeitschrift* 5, 65-84.

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